

Professor Angela Thody of the University of Lincoln lectures on various qualitative research methods for social scientists, including narrative, interviewing, diaries and observation and visual data, the subject of this presentation. She works with mainly post-graduate groups but has lectured for undergraduates also.

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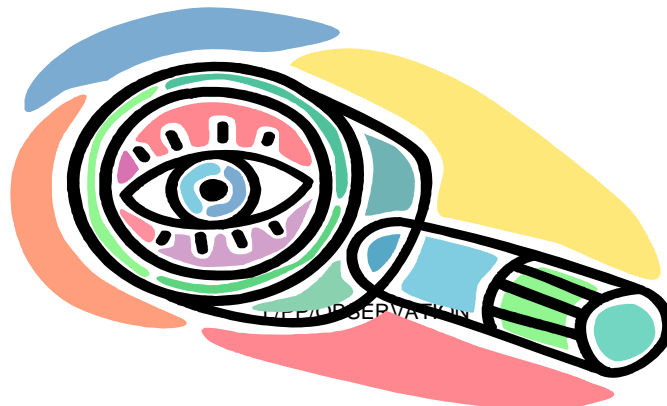
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Keywords: visual data; photographs; paintings; observation; videos; research

University of Lincoln
Centre for Educational Research and Development
Doctoral Programmes

**Research Tools:
Using visual data
*Professor Angela Thody***

***Summary notes will be given at the end. If you want
material additional to the slides, take your own
notes***



***DESCRIBE WHAT YOU'VE OBSERVED SINCE YOU
ENTERED THIS ROOM...***

**Research project:
experiences of mature students at post 1990s universities**

**YOUR OWN NOTES
NO CONFERRING
QUICK JOTTINGS BUT LEGIBLE**

COMPARE NOTES...

What elements did you include?

people, furniture, ambience, equipment, vegetation, windows, position in the building, room size, activities by lecturer and/or students, others?

How far did you focus on the same elements as did others?

Did you describe or comment? How neutral was your language? Was it emotive/normative?

Using visual data: observation

Structuring observation records:

Data =

- Basics – timing and timed intervals, coding, who, where
- Analysis categories - set in advance or post-facto ?
- Records that ‘take you there’ – rich pictures
- Everything
- See analysis sheets and completed examples

Research tools: visual data – more than your own observation



**PRIMARY: CREATED FOR
YOUR RESEARCH**

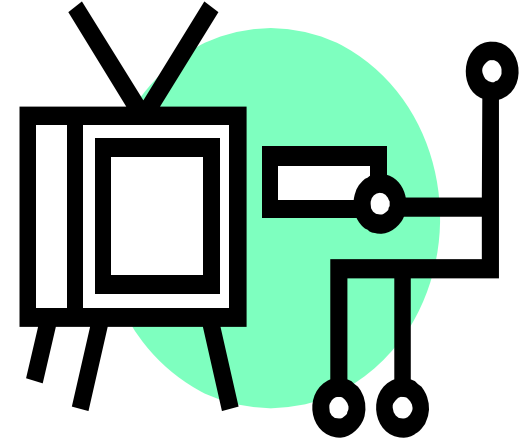
e.g. visual depiction:

video of interviews,
photos of locations

e.g. visualisations:

diagrams, sketches, figures

e.g. personal observations



**SECONDARY –
EXISTING
IMAGES ABOUT
YOUR RESEARCH**

e.g. visual anthropology/
history/ social sciences:

**Advertisements, book covers, photos, film, paintings,
sculpture, clothes; previous observations**



Research data sources: **Why use visual data?**

To illuminate, excite, give depth, triangulate.

It's a powerful learning tool

**It celebrates subjectivity and post-modernist
polyvocality and subject participation**

Visual data sources

Personal observation

TV and film media

Pictorial metaphors – e.g. comics, cartoons

Paintings, sculpture – artistic representations

**WHAT INFERENCES CAN YOU MAKE for
this research project from the book covers
shown on the next slide?**

Research project:

the effect of school images in literature on teenage attitudes

ALLY'S WORLD 

CRUSHES, CLIQUEs AND the COOL SCHOOL TRIP



KAREN McCOMBIE

SCHOLASTIC

FOR THE SAKE of the SCHOOL

Angela
Brazil



IS VISUAL DATA TRUSTWORTHY?

The camera never lies

Developed from modernist perspectives concerning objectivity

Images can be easily manipulated

Post-modernist perspectives = subjectivity (who took the pictures, why, how, what was left out, what was selected for inclusion)

MAKING VISUAL DATA TRUSTWORTHY



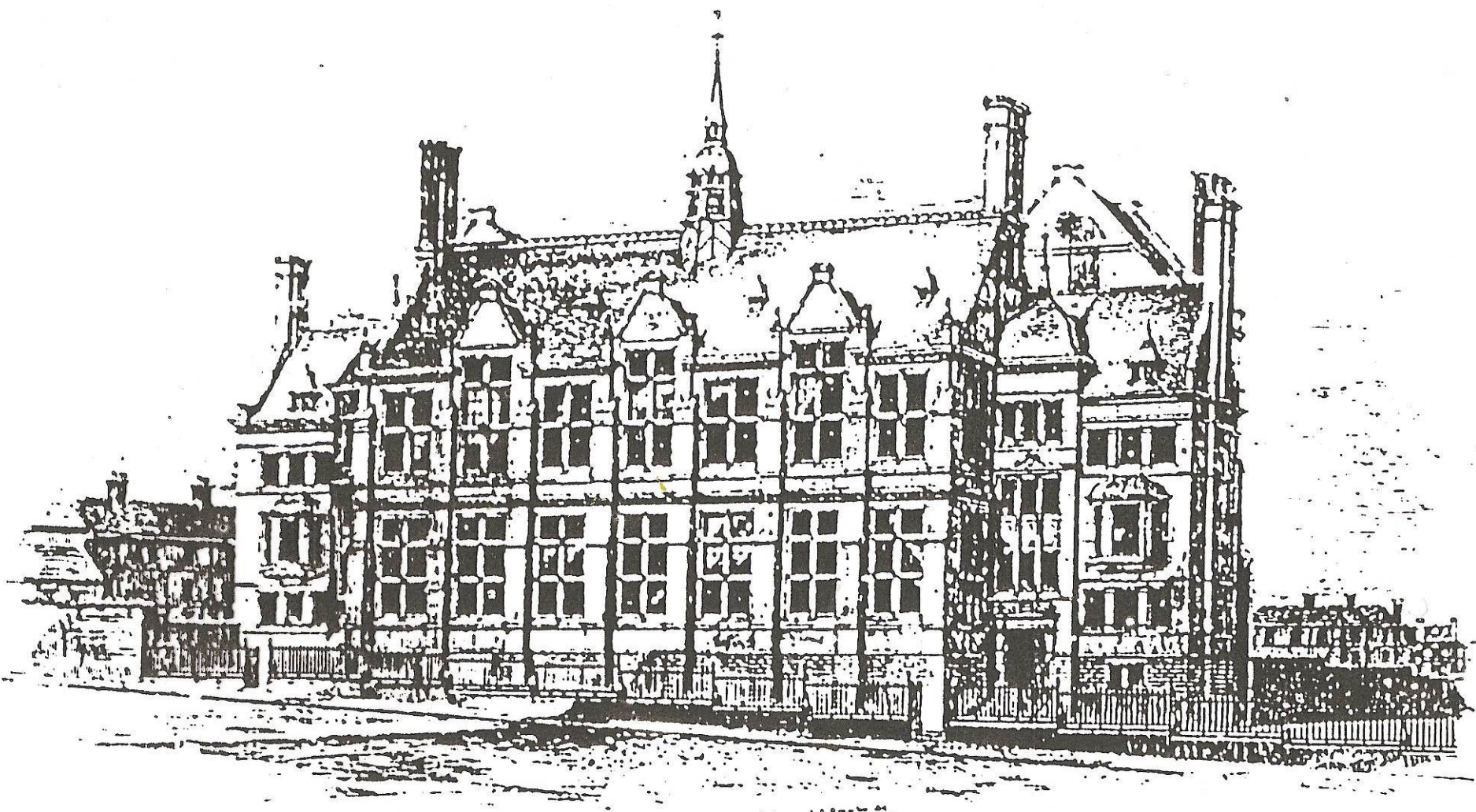
Completeness from numerous perspectives

Interpretation – yours and the readers'

**Transparency about - sources and your access to them;
rationale for visual data
what's in and what's not in**

Research project: the influence of school building on pedagogic styles

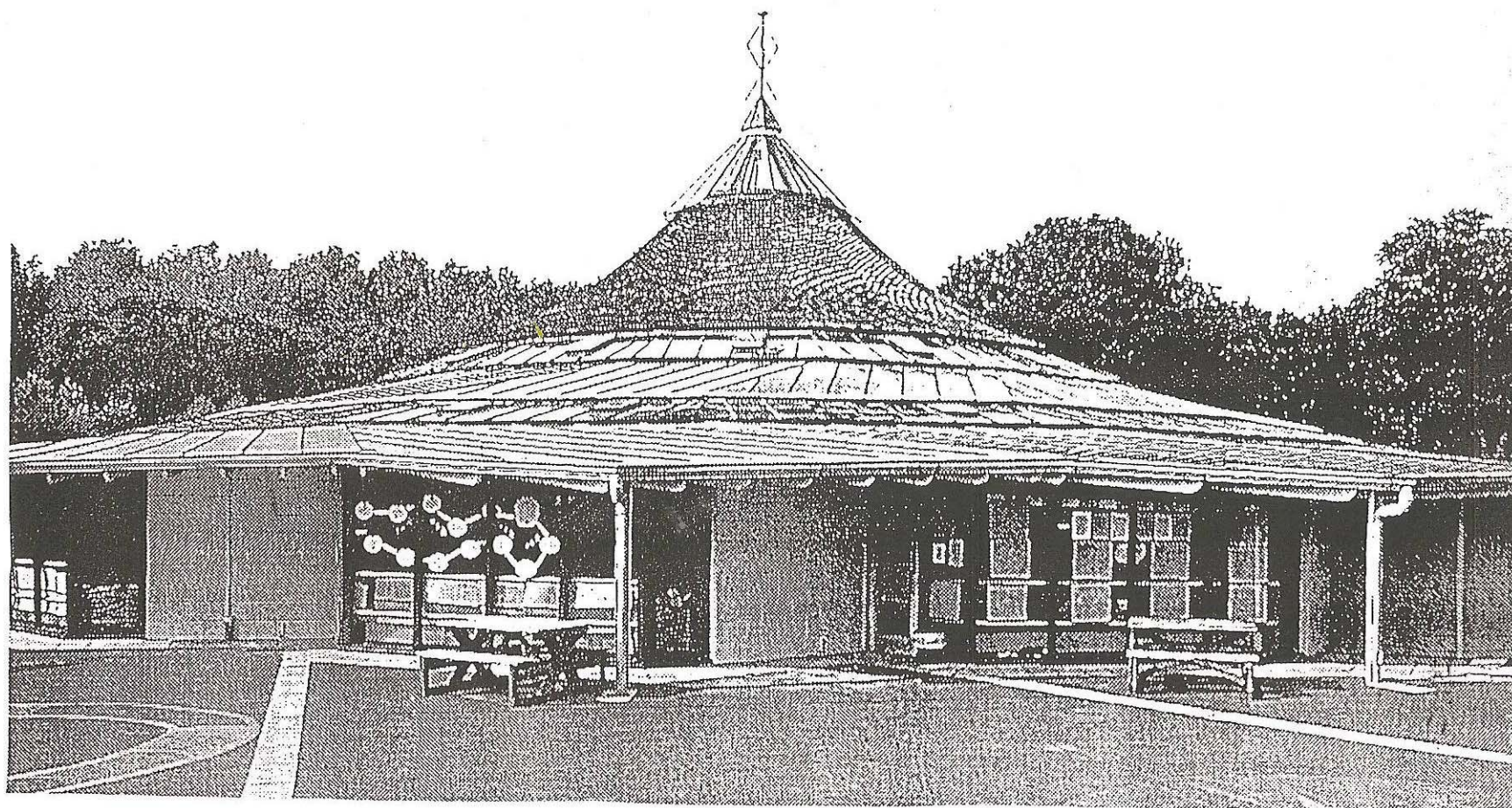
How trustworthy do you rate the following images for the above project?



385. THE STANLEY ROAD HIGHER GRADE SCHOOL, NOTTINGHAM.

A. N. Bromley, Architect.

Stoke Park Infants School



Research Tools: Observation

*I have a little shadow
That goes in and out
with me
But what can be the use
of it
Is more than I can see*
**EXCEPT FOR
OBSERVATION
RESEARCH**



Research tools: Observation

This is a method of social science research in which the subjects are, as far as possible, directly observed in their normal setting and their normal pattern of work

Contrast with experimental research in which one introduces variables to see if normal behaviour changes

It's a tool to aid scientific description of human societies (ethnography)

It aims at a rich picture in words – but pictures can be used too

Research Tools: observation - the good and the less good

Most fascinating, emotionally involving

Best for in-depth and exciting learning

Analytically complex

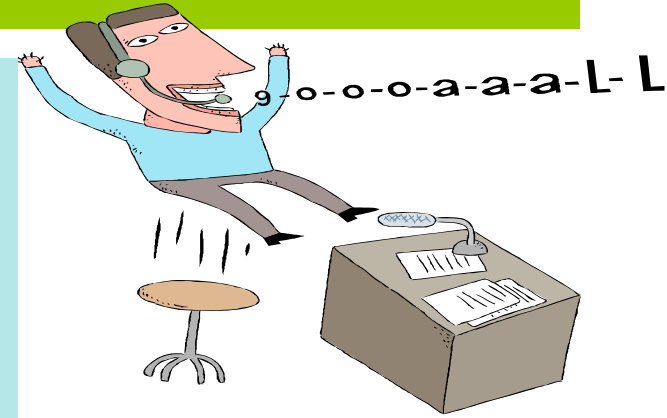
Time consuming

Tiring – very concentrated

Phenomenally boring to analyse and time consuming to transcribe – but can use analysis tools like NUDIST

Sometimes boring during observations too

Interesting presentation options



Research tools: observation

Observation for use in research by part-time, post graduate students in full time work is likely to be insider

- **A member of the organisation who joins in the normal life of that organisation, has a temporary or permanent recognised role in that organisation and conducts the research while in that role – termed, ‘participant observation’.**

It can be therefore be covert (but mind your ethics!) or overt

Examples

Headteacher observing governors’ meetings

Estates officer recording student interventions into strategic planning meetings

Research tools: observation

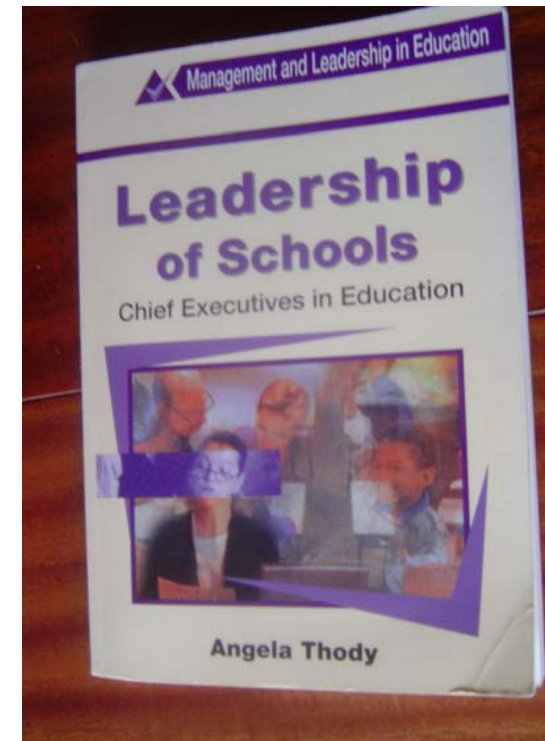
**Participant observation for part time students
is likely to be**

**limited to a short period or
to one person or
to one focus, e,g meetings
as part of a study**

**e.g. O'Sullivan, F., Thody, A. and Wood, E.
2000, *From Bursar to School Business
Manager*, Prentice Hall**

**BUT - IT CAN BE MORE EXTENSIVE –
e.g. Thody, A. (1997) *Leadership of Schools*,
Cassell**

9 YEARS, 9 CEOs, all days



Outsider observation:

The researcher has no recognised role in the organisation – termed ‘non-participant observation’ – CAN BE OVERT OR COVERT

e.g.

- **a post graduate IEL student who visits the organisation of another student to undertake a comparative study**
- **a professor who observes a bursar at work in a school**
- **researcher who temporarily becomes a shop assistant to research staff pilfering**

Visual data - observations

HOW COULD/DO YOU USE OBSERVATION IN YOUR RESEARCH?



Research tools: Observation - more advantages and disadvantages

Advantages

Insider information

Credibility

Detail

Takes you to the 'feel' of the place

Closeness to subject

Possible Disadvantages

Cannot reveal insider information

Not easily verified

Too data rich – time consuming to analyse

Challenging to present

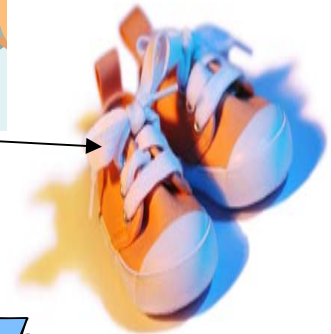
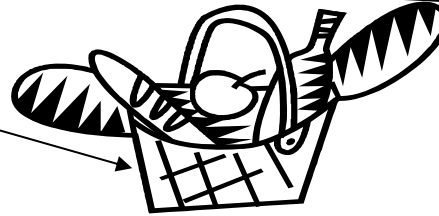
Going native

Research tools: observation - How to observe –
LESSONS FROM PEOPLE TRACKING

Clothes to fit the occasion



Comfortable shoes



Food and drink survival rations

Be where you can see the action



Notebooks and numerous pens



Don't speak until spoken to
Record inconspicuously



L/PP/C



*Research tools: observation- **What to record***

***Describe – DON'T ANALYSE
DON'T COMMENT***

Keep each activity separate

***Note the visuals - body language, facial expressions
and surroundings,***

Don't forget that silences speak volumes too

THE LANGUAGE OF OBSERVATION: a little practice

1. I AM MOVING TO STAND BEHIND YOU
2. DO NOT LOOK AROUND AT ME

3. WRITE A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF ME – NOTES WILL DO

**Research project:
experiences of mature students at post 1990s universities**

Test your notes:

Will they be enough to remind you of the scene in 6 months time when you analyse the data?

Will they be enough/appropriate for 'taking your readers into the scene?

What elements did you include? Was it neutral language? Did you comment?

Was it embarrassing?

Research tools: observation

Challenges...

It's embarrassing (but everyone gets used to it)

'What the hell was he going to do with this woman every Wednesday for the next two months? ' (Lodge,D. 1989:116)

'Oh Angela's very good at it. It's just me who finds being observed difficult' CEO observed for Thody, 1997.

Comfort breaks!



Research tools: observation - challenges

Going native = temporary cloning

Conscious and unconscious feelings of hostility and love

Makes you question your own assumptions:

Flitting backwards and forwards across the frontier between...two zones whose values, priorities, language and manners were so utterly disparate, [the observer] felt like a secret agent; and as secret agents are apt to do, suffered occasional spasms of doubt about the righteousness of her own side

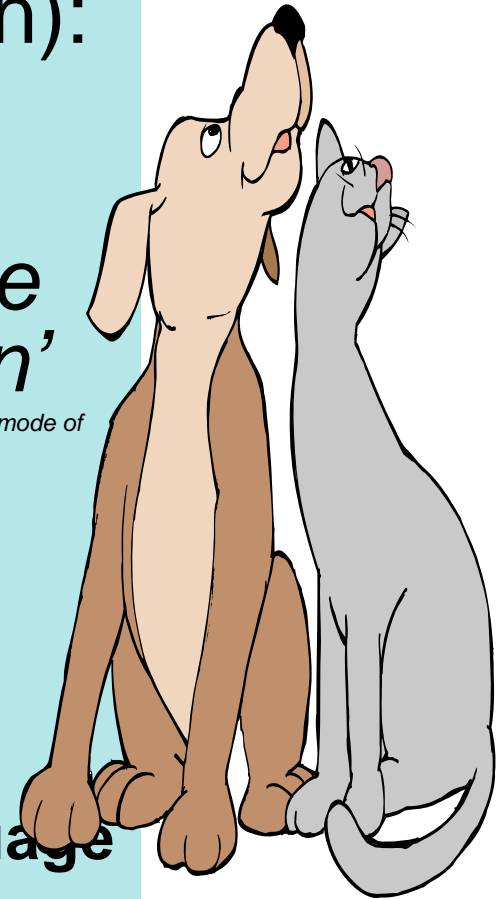
(Lodge, D. 1989, Nice Work, p. 216).

Research tools: observation - challenges

Going native is valuable (and fun):
Co-existence is a vital tool to release temporarily 'all preoccupation with self [to] move into a state of complete attention'

(Heshusius, L. (1994) *Freeing ourselves from objectivity: managing subjectivity or turning towards a participatory mode of consciousness?* Educational Researcher, p. 17)

To avoid the worst excesses:
Don't analyse data immediately
Record non-judgementally
Don't chat with your subject
Use neutral, non-participant body language



*Research Tools: observation -
Selecting your subjects and when you will observe*

= finding the willing
= agreeing to almost anything
= seizing opportunities
= write, phone, meet
= a limited number

Your best chances are:

- ☺ **Friends**
- ☺ **Grape vine**
- ☺ **Powerful**
- ☺ **Opposite sex**
- ☺ **Around same age or status as you**

Research tools: observation - challenges

Do those observed 'play to the gallery'?

YES – irresistible! – David Lodge's manager 'played to silent applause; Valerie Hall's 1994 study on gender found that the principals behaved differently when observed; Thody's 1997 study of CEOs found they felt self-conscious and one said he was 'more optimistic and positive than usual'

Both researcher and researched have to provide explanations and introductions which interrupt normal work pattern.



Others who are unwitting or peripheral participants don't have time to adjust to the research

Research tools: observation - challenges

Do those observed 'play to the gallery'?

NO -

Most are oblivious to the researcher because they are too busy



Thody, 1997, checked after the observations to find that the subjects were reported to 'always work at this pace', 'always swear like this'.

Much activity is unaffected by researcher presence – eg large meetings, phone calls

Research tools: observation - challenges

Exhaustion

The travel...

The concentration...

The new places, new faces and in-jokes

The heroine in Nice Work felt 'confused, battered, exhausted by the sense-impressions' (Lodge, 1989:120)

Observation – and finally

Saying goodbye to your subjects – prepare to shed tears! Keep in touch

Advice to observation researchers: ‘Behave like a gentleman, keep off the women, take quinine daily and play it by ear...and stay sober enough to write up your field notes the next day’

(Meek, V.L. 1987, ‘The coalface revisited’ in Macpherson, R.J.S. *Ways and Meanings of Research in Educational Administration*, University of New England, Armidale, Australia)